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## Capital Closeup

# For Basic Look at Heredity

By JUDITH RANDAL

/WASHINGTON—In the Middle Ages, academicians argued endlessly about how many angels could stand on the point of a needle. This provided theologians with lasting employment, but did little to help the common man enter the kingdom of heaven.

Last week at a genetics course on Mount Desert Island, Maine, a professor of zoology from the University of Chicago took issue with fellow scientists on similar grounds. About 100

doctors and others had spent two weeks there among the idyllic pointed firs learning about the arcane intricacies of genetics. Dr. Richard C. Lewontin told them that most of the information they were getting was "not very interesting" and mostly "a waste of time."

Had this year's course—a joint annual effort by the Jackson Laboratory and Johns Hopkins University, financially assisted by the National Foundation—been held five years ago, one would have disagreed. Then the discovery of a defective gene and its linkage to specific pathology or the pedigree of a family with the circus-rubber-man syndrome would have seemed important in themselves.

But this year, after lecture after lecture on hereditary disorders, each of which afflicts perhaps one person in 10,000 and which collectively affect possibly 100 in 10,000, one could see what Lewontin meant. Surely, in a world menaced by population pressures and racial controversy, geneticists must be capable of more significant research.

### Form of Malnutrition

For example, the scientists discussed at length a class of genetic defects called "inborn errors of metabolism." To oversimplify somewhat, these give rise to abnormal enzymes which, in turn, make it impossible for the individual to derive the normal benefits from food. Behavioral disorders or mental retardation are the frequent result.

In effect, these disorders are a form of malnutrition whose biochemical consequences differ little, if at all, from the malnutrition caused by insufficient amounts of the proper food. So it is noteworthy that at the very schoolhouse where the course was held there was discovered correspond-

ence from a school official to the Board of Supervisors saying that money would be lacking next year to give children of local families on relief free midday meals.

That such a letter should have been written in Bar Harbor, one of America's better known resorts, is ironic. That scientists concerned with genetically induced malnutrition should fail to draw the obvious parallels with protein-calorie deprivation is more ironic still. Yet the words "hunger" and "malnutrition" never crossed their lips.

Similarly ignored or overlooked was the contribution genetics research might make to intelligent management of the population explosion.

### Test of Diversity

Lewontin pointed out that current emphasis on contraception for family planning may result in a curtailment of man's genetic diversity. Presumably this diversity has had a purpose in that it has perpetuated the processes of natural selection which keeps a species biologically fit—in Darwinian terms, capable of healthier reproducing.

Now is the time, Lewontin says, to test this theory, to find out what will happen if man, rather than nature, sets the genetic limits for future generations. In his view, money would be better spent on this investigation than on the mapping of chromosomes or research into rare hereditary defects—particularly since geneticists are now more adept at cataloguing such defects than correcting them.

Affirming Alexander Pope's belief that "the proper study of mankind is man," Lewontin would also pay less attention to studies of inbred laboratory animals and more to research to throw light on the explosive issue of race.